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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SUVA 000393

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TAGS: [MARR](#) [PREL](#) [FJ](#)

SUBJECT: FIJI MILITARY COMMANDER RESUMES OFFENSIVE V.
CIVILIAN GOVERNMENT; REPORTEDLY ATTEMPTS TO INVOKE U.S.

REF: A. SUVA 255

[1](#)B. SUVA 214

[1](#)C. SUVA 389

[1](#)D. SUVA 209

[1](#)E. SUVA 254

Classified By: Amb. Dinger. Sec. 1.4 (B,D).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) Commander Bainimarama reignited public conflict with PM Qarase's government during a speech last weekend. In a follow-up interview that was headlined "Army outburst 'on US advice'" on the front page of the 9/25 Fiji Sun, Bainimarama reportedly said he drew motivation from the remarks of the Commander, U.S. Army Pacific, LtGen. Brown at the Pacific Regional Armies Seminar (PAMS) recently held in Fiji. Most of Fiji's civilian leaders declined immediate comment. LtGen. Brown's remarks that complimented free and frank discussions within PAMS seminars on military topics were taken entirely out of context. We have provided clarification to the media (see para 4). Prods for Bainimarama's volatile remarks could have been that, as threatened before last May's elections, PM Qarase recently requested Fiji's President to seek clarification of the RFMF's constitutional role. Qarase has also introduced controversial "land" bills in Parliament, against Bainimarama's advice. Most people in Fiji have relished a period of calm since the elections and have been encouraged by efforts to find common political ground. Bainimarama's remarks have set the public's nerves again on edge. End Summary.

Fiji military commander reignites civ-mil friction

[1](#)2. (U) During remarks at a secondary school's passing out parade for military cadets on Saturday, Sept. 23, the Commander of the RFMF, Commodore Bainimarama, harshly criticized the government of Prime Minister Qarase for advocating controversial legislation like a "qoliqoli" bill that has been proposed to clarify coastal land/fishing rights. Bainimarama's remarks appeared to end an informal truce with Qarase after last May's elections returned the Qarase government to power (see refs A and B).

Commodore reportedly inspired by U.S. PAMS comments

[1](#)3. (U) In a follow-up interview with the Fiji Sun newspaper, Bainimarama reportedly said he drew motivation from remarks by LtGen. John Brown, USARPAC, during the PAMS that took place in Fiji Sept. 11-15. The Sun's front-page headline on Monday, Sept. 25, was "Army outburst 'on US advice'." The

article says Bainimarama was motivated to speak out by LtGen. Brown's "challenge" during PAMS that divisive issues "should not be faced with politeness but with honesty." The article says that Bainimarama, in his closing speech to PAMS said that, "the military, as you (Gen. Brown) have suggested, cannot and should not be too polite in these areas and should deal with them with an attitude that is sincere, frank, direct, and truthful." (Note: Bainimarama is currently visiting the UN with Home Affairs Minister Vosanibola to discuss PKO issues, per ref C. We cannot confirm the accuracy of the statements attributed to Bainimarama in the article.) The article reports that PM Qarase and a spokesman for the "opposition" Fiji Labor Party (FLP) declined comment. Opposition Leader Mick Beddoes reportedly said U.S. generals have "no jurisdiction over Fiji."

No relation to actual context: media correction

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14. (U) On seeing the article (which was not vetted with the Embassy), we contacted LtGen. Brown and confirmed that his comments were taken entirely out of context. His reference to frank and direct discussion related to the excellent conversations that took place among the multi-national group of military attendees during PAMS seminars on military-related coalition-operations issues. His remarks were not directed toward and were not intended to apply to civil-military relations. The Ambassador held a media event on Sept. 25 and distributed the following statement:

"The United States Government has a very strong belief that the military must be subordinate to the elected civilian leadership in a democracy. We routinely convey that view during U.S. training events for foreign military officers,

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and, as necessary, we make the point directly with foreign militaries.

"A front-page headline in the Monday, September 25, Fiji Sun suggests that RFMF Commander Bainimarama took a different message from a statement by the Commander, U.S. Army Pacific, Lieutenant General John Brown, during the recent Pacific Armies Management Seminar (PAMS) held in Nadi, Fiji, for military leaders from 30 Asia-Pacific nations.

"I have spoken with Lieutenant General Brown. In his closing remarks to the PAMS, he complimented the "open, candid, and frank conversations" that took place in the PAMS seminar sessions, which were solely devoted to military discussions of military subjects related to peacekeeping operations.

"Lieutenant General Brown's remarks were not in any way intended to suggest how military leaders in democracies should relate to their civilian governments.

"In fact, Lieutenant General Brown emphasized to me the U.S. view, which is his view, that the military in a democracy must not attempt to involve itself in politics and must not give the impression it is seeking to usurp the powers of the elected civilian government.

"In sum, the PAMS seminars and Lieutenant General Brown's remarks were solely focused on how military forces can best cooperate to implement international coalition operations."
End statement.

PM Qarase's effort to clarify RFMF roles

15. (U) In response to Bainimarama's Saturday speech, PM Qarase revealed publicly that he recently activated his pre-election threat to seek a definitive Supreme Court opinion on the proper role of the military in domestic politics in Fiji (Ref D). Qarase said President Iloilo, who as Commander in Chief would be the proper authority to initiate a Supreme Court review, has the request in his in-box.

Comment

¶6. (C) Commodore Bainimarama's anti-government remarks Saturday at the school were deliberate. We had heard just beforehand that he was going to deliver a controversial speech. While we cannot confirm if the Fiji Sun interview was a deliberate attempt to tie the U.S. to his approach, we can confirm that Embassy Suva and U.S. high-level visitors have repeatedly made clear to Bainimarama and others in the RFMF leadership the U.S. view of the proper civil-military relationship.

¶7. (C) It appears the relative peace in Fiji's civil-military relations since the May elections were an anomaly, not the new norm. Bainimarama's motivations could include: 1) an awareness that Qarase is following through on the request for a Supreme Court opinion and 2) unhappiness that Qarase continues to push for the qoliqoli and other controversial legislation. We sense Bainimarama is swimming against a heavy tide of public opinion that has approved of the current, relatively cordial multi-party cabinet system (ref E), revels in the current less-confrontational politics, and wants past civil-military frictions to subside. That said, the current political calm has been fragile in any case, as FLP leader Chaudhry is seeking to penalize several of his colleagues now in Cabinet who are actively seeking multi-party solutions to Fiji's major problems. End Comment.
DINGER